

THE THEME OF 'SELF-QUEST' IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S

THAT LONG SILENCE

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Deshpande is one of the prominent contemporary, woman writer in India, writing in English. Her novels reveal the women's quest for self, an exploration into the female psyche and an awareness of the mysteries of life and the protagonists' place in it. Her first novel *Roots and Shadows* published after *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and *If I Die Today*, indicate the initial quest of woman for herself. The same quest is continued in her later novel *That Long Silence*. The novelist explains that all her protagonists are related with their 'selves'. Her women like those of her predecessors, are tolerant, obedient, passive and submissive

The title of the novel *That Long Silence* suggests a belated reaction, a postponement of offensive behavior for long till postponement cannot be made any more. The patience of silence and endurance is broken and its outcome is a new-women with egotistical affirmations and emotional explosions. As Shashi Deshpande herself states "Innermost feelings come out in my writings. The kind of emotions we know women have but never come out" (Shekhar 34)

The present paper titled "The Theme of 'Self-quest' in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*" focuses on the discord and the disillusionment of the middle class educated Indian women in a tradition bound Indian society. Women's quest for self exploration is the principal theme of this novel. The novels of Shashi Deshpande are about women's self-quest and struggle to free themselves from the restrictions imposed by society, culture and nature. This paper shows of how, the protagonist Jaya goes through the process of self-quest, by gaining her voice to break her silence. This part of the paper is an endeavor to indicate all these

KEYWORDS: Shashi Deshpande, Self-Quest, Long Silence, Fiction

INTRODUCTION

DISCUSSIONS

In the novel *That Long Silence* Deshpande depicts the anxiety and difficulty of middle Class family. Mohan, to obtain name and fame as well as prestige and security, is involved in some misdeeds as a result of which he faces inquiry and loses his job. Agarwal, a co-partner in the same deed advises him to stay away from the office until the storm is over. Mohan, along with his wife Jaya, decides to go and reside for a while at Jaya's maternal uncle's flat in Churchgate. Although in silent indignation, the mode of self-examination and self-criticism begin for Jaya. She is ever haunted by the memories of the past – her earlier life and her marriage with Mohan. The desperations and the disappointments in her 17 years old marital existence, her personal failures, all these begin to haunt and torment her. Jaya can no longer be a passive, submissive and silent partner to Mohan. The novel ends with her determination to speak, to break her long silence. This way she is representative of girls who are brought up in the middle class families in post-independent India

That Long Silence depicts Jaya's self-doubts, fears, guilt, silent indignation towards articulation and assertion. Suman Ahuja, a reputed critic, observes that Jaya

Caught in an emotional eddy, endeavors to come to terms with her
protean roles, while trying albeit in vain, to re-discover her true self,
which is but an ephemera...an unfulfilled wife, disappointed mother
and a failed writer. (456)

Deshpande's heroines come from a huge joint family where they learn that men are the 'sheltering tree' to them. If they try to alienate themselves from men they are threatened and feel in-secured. Insecurity prevents Jaya to break her silence. She has been taught that women must not show their anger outwardly. Once her neighbour Kamat comments that her writings lack anger and personal view. For that her comment is "Why? Because no women can be angry. Have you ever heard of angry young women?" (That Long Silence 147)

The opportunities to express their likes and dislikes are denied to women. Ultimately they have to surrender themselves and they have to show their consent. Jaya is not an exception. Before marriage her education and culture are primary to Mohan. After marriage they become secondary. Loss of identity creates inclination towards life in her. Her reproaches would be considered adamant and that may cause a gulf between her and Mohan. So, she is anticipated to reconcile with the situations though she does not approve it. She is not convinced with the way Mohan gets a job and his malpractices. When Mohan shifts their residence to Churchgate, she silently follows him. Being submissive is called the strength of women by Mohan but for Jaya it is despair "I saw despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and Surrender" (That Long Silence 39)

To have an independent self is the pursuit of Jaya. But she can relish this idea only in her mind. Physical security and financial support are given to her by her husband. Self-experiment reveals the truth of the urge for liberty. But the tradition that rooted in her mind sets her back. She could not even think of the separation from her husband. She wants to cut off herself from her husband but when it happens in real life, she is shattered. She decides to put an end to self-analysis which heightens only her 'Self'. She tries to understand Mohan and her children

The dilemma causes a setback in her nature; she becomes static to the events and fails in her duty as a mother and a wife. She becomes dispassionate to human relationships. She confesses that she is solely responsible for her son's detachment to life. She is often blamed by Mohan for not responding to his questions. Her silence can be interpreted in terms of consent or submission

Her attempts to emancipate herself from the entanglements of the society will detach her from the family as well as the society. From the diary of Jaya we read it is not only her destiny but the women in her family like Kusum, Vimala and Mohan's mother are also destined to suffer by male-chauvinism. In this concern Deshpande attempts to universalize the silence of woman

The silence of the protagonist is the key mechanism of the novelist. The narrative is in the first person and the protagonist reads her mind from her diary. Her silence is the speaker. Jaya's husband disappears for a while to escape from the inquiry and her son has been sent with their family friend to spend the vacation. For the first time in her life she gets leisure time. This loneliness derives her to indulge in self-experiment. Deshpande has employed the technique of stream of consciousness through which the process of self experiment can be done possibly in silence

Silence can be interpreted in two ways, acceptance or denial. Quite often Mohan's questions are responded with silence. He could not make the real sense out of her silence and it irritates him. Jaya's silence is a blend of consent and protest. Mohan is impressed by her fluency in spoken English. His ambition is to marry a 'Cultured, educated woman'. Deshpande deliberately weakens the character of Mohan and presents him as a callous and intellectually weak husband. Both the husband and wife are aware of their potentiality and naturally the wife comes down for compromise. Otherwise her conjugal life would be collapsed. She realizes her dissatisfaction and inclination to life by the inner reading of her mind

This realization of self is the beginning of protest. Most of the events are silently evaded by her. The reluctance to answer or respond to the questions or events shows her silent protest. Chhote La Khatri observes it as

Perhaps she conveys the message of that the seeds of rebellion are shown in the modern Indian women who want to revolt but somehow take their steps back for they are yet to prepare for open revolt. (*Indian Novels in English: Sense and Sensibility* 114)

In her attempt of self-analysis she fails to fix her position for her in the society. She is neither a traditional Hindu house wife nor a modern woman. She is a woman with split personality, woman with traditional inheritance and modern feminist ideologies

Deshpande's heroines belong to post-Independence middle-class society. They pursue a dream in their life, a dream to have an identity. For instance characters like Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* and Jaya in *That Long Silence* are all well educated, intelligent women who strive to get recognition in the society. Jaya feels that she has totally lost her identity even in her name. Her father named her Jaya which means 'Victory'. But after marriage her husband changed her name as 'Suhasini' which means, "Soft smiling, placid, motherly women" (*That Long Silence* 19)

Though he calls her Jaya, her name is written as Suhasini. Mohan is a callous man, who bothers only about the public life and discards private life with his wife. He asks Jaya to cut her hair short like a wife of an executive but confronts against her writing to journals. But for Jaya's writing is a bridge between private and public. It is a private activity, an act of self-expression and liberation which leads to self-knowledge. Meenakshi Bharat says, "Jaya's writing is a function of the heightened consciousness, the education, the leisure and privacy to which her class portion gives her access" (*Desert in Bloom: Contemporary Indian Women's Fiction in English* 85)

In spite of her husband's confrontation she continues her writing which shows her struggle to ascertain her writing capacity. Her novel wins a prize, but Mohan feels it is a true story of his own life. He is sacred and hurt

Jaya how could You, how could you have done it?...They will all know all those people who read this and know us, they will think I am this kind of man, they will think I am this man. How can I look any one in the face again? And you, how could you write those things, how could you write such ugly things, how will you face people after this? (*That Long Silence* 44)

Despite her inclination to life she takes steps to make a happy life with her husband and children. Compromising keeps the balance of the family. Deshpande contrasts Jaya's personality with Mohan. She is glorified as, "Intellectually superior, prudent, compromising and adaptable to the situation" (*Indian Novels in English: Sense and Sensibility* 118)

Discord between Jaya and Mohan is due to lack of communication between them yet she longs for his love and care. The assessment of her 'self' reveals the fact that how she has failed to play the role of an ideal mother and a wife. She dissolves to mend the mistakes and tries to become Mohan's wife and mother of her two children. She gets sudden enlightenment from the words of Gita, "Do what you desire" (*That Long Silence* 79). The choice is left to her and now she has to choose. She chooses the choice of a modern woman that is establishing herself, staunching her identity without neglecting her duty as a mother and a wife

Jaya shrinks and coils into herself because Mohan is not open to her. She requires some emotional outlet to share her thoughts and views. Kamat, a man lived in the upstairs of her flat is a good companion to her. Kamat is the only person to whom she discusses her writings. She gets from Kamat the best of her father's concern for her. The most comforting for her from him is his unflattering comments on her writings. She gets reassurance and best of attention from Kamat, which she would like to have from Mohan. Her identity as a writer is assured by Kamat thus her quest for identity is achieved through friendship. Anjana Sharma says, "Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence*, describes the experience of modern educated, middleclass women" (*Contemporary Indian Women's Fiction in English* 98)

CONCLUSIONS

It is obvious that Deshpande's novels are written on feminist perspective in the Indian context. Jaya the protagonist proves herself as a traditional Hindu woman. Towards the end, citing from Gita, she resolves to be the master of her choice and hopes that will enable her to be on equal terms with Mohan and to erase the silence between them. She believes that life would be impossible without hope. She hopes that life can be made possible

Thus, as the title of the novel indicates, Jaya, for her seventeen years past life, has tried to play the role of a traditional woman, the embodiment of tolerance, suffering and courage. However, she becomes the modern egotistical self-assertive rebellious woman all these being marks of new-woman. The desertion of the conventional passive and submissive role and adoption of the new role present a women's perspective on the world and it focuses on women's issues

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